

Singling Black Boys to Close the Gaps

An achievement issue some view as an intractable racial divide, the Ossining district pursues as 'our moral imperative'. by Phyllis Glassman and Robert J. Roelle

Picture a group of African-American 6th-grade boys posing in front of New York City's Lincoln Center for a photo opportunity, dressed for success in suits while awaiting a performance of a Harlem Renaissance cultural arts experience.

Imagine a cadre of black male high school students spending a day at Harvard for inspiration and encouragement, hosted by a former schoolmate who's now a sophomore there.

Consider a front-page article in *The New York Times* and an editorial in *The Baltimore Sun* celebrating the efforts of a school district to build successful school experiences for its black and African-American males.

If you can picture, imagine and consider these images, then welcome to the Ossining Union Free School District in suburban Westchester County, N.Y., where we consider it our moral imperative to eradicate the achievement gap and are making these opportunities a reality for our African-American male students. (*The New York Times* described the district's programs aimed at getting black male students to college as "a new frontier.")

We would not be satisfied to merely close the performance gap. Our board of education, along with the administration and faculty, has embraced the idea of eliminating learning disparities in our school community. When we first broadcast this message at a back-to-school assembly on opening day in September 2000, a notable gasp erupted in the Ossining High School auditorium, which was bursting with 750 school district staff plus board members. Most had returned from rejuvenating summer vacations eager to hear the usual cheerful message of "All's Right With the World" but instead were confronted with something quite apart.

The fact we publicly acknowledged we had a serious achievement gap between students of color and white students in a suburban school system was a bold, courageous and shocking way to begin the new school year. Our call to eradicate the achievement gap among student groups on the opening day of school surprised our colleagues.

Diverse Environment

Our journey to improve the educational outcomes for students of color began in 1992 when we arrived in the Ossining School District. The school district assembly in 2000 certainly qualifies as a benchmark date along with the June 2002 release of a final set of recommendations for action by the Superintendent's Advisory Council on the Achievement Gap.

We discovered our work locally was underscored and validated, as well, by a remarkable issue of *The School Administrator* in January 2005, featuring articles by N. Gerry House ("Reclaiming Children Left Behind"), Rossi Ray-Taylor ("Lessons Learned About the Achievement Gap") and Rosa Smith ("Black Boys: The Sad Facts"). Their work leading highly diverse school

environments provided a context for our own challenge.

We consider the world of the Ossining School District our very own mini-United Nations. When people move to Ossining, they pride themselves on their commitment to diversity. We educate children of multimillionaires as well as sons and daughters of recent immigrants from around the globe who are learning to speak and write English and attempting to earn a living wage.

The school district today enrolls students born in 61 countries who speak 38 languages. Racially, the student body in Ossining looks like this: 38 percent white, 16 percent African American/black, 38 percent Hispanic/Latino and 5 percent Asian. About a third qualify for the federal lunch program. Academic achievement ranges widely. Four students entered Harvard University last fall with many other students returning back to their home countries still learning basic English and struggling to meet grade-level expectations under No Child Left Behind.

One of our recent Harvard students, Ryan A. Williams, was featured in the September 2006 issue of Westchester Magazine. An African American, Williams told the magazine the Ossining schools had offered him "a multitude of opportunities that no doubt contributed to my admittance." He recounted how in 7th grade, he was selected for Ossining's highly competitive Prep for Prep Program.

"Before my freshman year in high school ... Princeton University's 'feeder school' contacted me, offering me a four-year scholarship, but I decided to stay enrolled in Ossining High School," said Williams, who last spring hosted a group of black males from Ossining High School for a campus visit at Harvard so they could get a taste of college life. His role modeling and mentoring of our younger African-American male students stand as an exemplar of our initiative.

During the past two years, the Ossining School District has addressed the education of black males aggressively, comprehensively, systematically and sensitively. Ossining's Long-Range Plan, the Advisory Council to Eradicate the Achievement Gap, strategic action plans, research-based initiatives and adaptive leadership/governance have promoted equity and excellence on behalf of black males.

In all venues, we express the statement "Children First." The subtitle of our long-range plan is: "Schools operate for the benefit of the children." We place children at the center of all decisions. Given an excellent superintendent/board of education governance team that values student success, we promote a learning community based upon continuous development.

Going Public

Our philosophy incorporates research on best practices as well as the theory that "A rising tide raises all ships." Rather than only targeting the success of black males (who comprise less than 10 percent of the student body of 4,200), we reasoned that by enhancing the opportunities, expectations and practices on behalf of all students, our African-American males would benefit.

Well before No Child Left Behind Act required it of every school system, we boldly disaggregated achievement data by student groups. Shocked and amazed by what we were reporting, residents who filled the board meeting room one night in 1992 listened to our school

report card presentation detail the wide gap in achievement test scores between black and white students locally. Residents expressed concerns. Hadn't the Ossining School District been recognized as one of the finest around? How could our school produce such inequitable outcomes?

We committed ourselves to overcome the inequities. We created initiatives relating to curriculum and instruction, reduced class size, recruited black male professionals for the teaching staff, introduced summer academies and extended the school day to enable our students of color to easily receive extra help and to experience greater academic success. Our newest long-range plan, adopted in 2005, extends until 2011.

The community readily understood our concentrated effort to close the achievement gap in Ossining, but the specific focus on black males required considerable explanation. We found it necessary to explain the consequences of depressed grade point averages, the low enrollment of black males in Advanced Placement courses and the small number of black males being admitted to selective colleges and universities. They consistently and disproportionately ranked well below what we knew was possible in grades and test scores. Too few African-American males believed in themselves, and too few could envision their success.

The district's initiatives on behalf of black males was an outgrowth of a superintendent/board retreat, where we reviewed the relevant literature on the subject and began focusing on our own local achievement of black males. We disaggregated the achievement data, then visited with each faculty at school-based meetings to share what we were seeing in the GPAs earned by our black male students.

Faculty members were surprised and, in some cases, shocked. Teachers who had educated many of our students in the primary grades could not believe certain individuals were not stars excelling in high school. Statements such as "How could he not have been on the honor roll? He was so smart!" and "He was a leader in class. He was earning excellent grades. How could he not have a GPA in the 90s?" were common.

Going public with the disappointing data provided a new catalyst for mobilizing our entire faculty. Instantly, teachers and administrators created new action plans and assumed ownership for the results. We developed a systemic process that would guide the district from prekindergarten through college admission.

Board Commitment

When we launched the Superintendent's Advisory Council on the Achievement Gap in 2000, we created a learning community of teachers, parents, administrators and even students who participated in student focus groups and individual interviews. We studied the literature, research and best practices. We hired Public Agenda, a professional surveying firm, to conduct focus groups with our black male students as well as other students of color and English language learners. Each member of the advisory council conducted individual interviews with students at Ossining High School.

We shared the council's final report and recommendations with the entire educational community of Ossining. We conducted workshops and outreach. The recommendations helped us extend the

district's long-range plan and create school action plans. Some proposed actions related to increasing teacher expectations, personalizing instruction for students, strengthening relationships between teachers and students, promoting smaller class sizes, expanding early childhood programs, creating cultural competence among faculty members, engaging in courageous conversations and increasing parental involvement. Our black male students have benefited considerably.

Given the systemic nature of our initiatives, it must be noted many have districtwide roots and others are school based. For the past three years, the first goal adopted by the board of education included this: "Education of Black and African-American Males: Each school will reflect upon its respective action plan of the previous school year, and develop an enhanced action plan to specifically address the education of Black and African-American males."

In addition, the board goal states explicitly: "It is expected that student achievement results as measured by various state and other standardized assessments as well as local data will reflect improved results when compared against 2006-2007 school year outcomes and improved achievement for ... African-American and Black students ... [and] gender: narrowing the achievement gap between females and males."

Additionally, the district's long-range plan includes components addressing the needs of black male students. All administrators as well as teachers have been trained in the Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement model to support the achievement of underrepresented groups and students of color.

Because we realize the achievement gap begins before youngsters enter prekindergarten, we have created a First Steps Program, a family literacy program that begins at birth. Last year, in our universal prekindergarten program, black youngsters made extraordinary gains in overall achievement and literacy, exceeding the progress of other student groups. We worked hard to implement a full-day kindergarten beginning in 2000-2001.

Bold Talk

The concept of "courageous conversations" has emerged as another districtwide phenomenon. No longer do people shy away from discussing race, racism, the use of the "N-word" and other sensitive topics. Although it remains a sensitive matter, when we discuss the achievement of black males, we engage one another as colleagues and missionaries.

As a school district we continue to promote greater equity in all areas, including cultural arts and athletics. We have redoubled our efforts to prepare our students to succeed in college-level courses at Ossining High School. Hiring staff members who mirror the diverse student makeup has enabled us to create one-on-one mentoring. In 1992 the district did not have a single principal or assistant principal of color. In 2006-07, nearly a third of our principals and assistant principals were people of color. In terms of classroom teachers, the representation of minorities has increased over the same period from 12 percent to nearly 25 percent. The district maintains an institutional membership with the National Association of Black School Educators.

At the secondary level, two specific programs have been implemented in school action plans:

High Hopes and Expectations: The College Track and Project Earthquake. The former serves black male students in 6th grade and their parents, providing early information about college admissions and financial aid, educational field trips to colleges and universities, cultural arts experiences such as a trip to Lincoln Center and a production on the Harlem Renaissance. The year-long program culminates with a recognition dinner for the 6th graders and their families in a local restaurant. The youth in our High Hopes not only dressed for success, they exuded success and confidence. High Hopes is now extended into 7th and 8th grades.

Project Earthquake at Ossining High School has attained a significant presence by supporting black males through rites of passage. The unique program combines academics with character education, field trips, cultural awareness, male bonding, parent appreciation, social sophistication, and college visits and orientations. During the project's first year, 2005-2006, our Earthquake men conducted a community telethon to earn resources to visit historically black universities in the South.

The program was extraordinarily successful with our students traveling by air, many of them for the first time, to visit an array of colleges and universities. Last year the telethon supported a trip to Harvard University. The participants could attend workshops on the personal triumphs of black males, the N-word, Black History Month and a session titled "To Be Popular or Smart," in addition to countless evening presentations for entire families. Pedro Noguera, an urban sociologist and executive director of the Metropolitan Center for Urban Education, graciously gave of his time to engage our black male students and their family members during a special family appreciation dinner program. Ryan Williams, now attending Harvard, had been a member of Project Earthquake.

At the high school level last spring, we hosted ACT-SO (Afro-Academic Cultural, Technological and Scientific Olympics), where many of our black male students earned outstanding distinction. Additionally, we offered appealing elective courses, including African-American Studies, the Black Experience through History and Literature, and Race, Ethnicity and Identity in the United States. These are designed as rigorous college-level courses.

The payoff of our efforts is apparent. A recent analysis indicated that 55 percent of the black students at Ossining High School eligible to enroll in college-level courses in 11th and 12th grades had done so during the 2006-2007 school year. This was an impressive gain over the 26 percent in 2004. College acceptances are on the rise with students attending some of the more selective colleges and universities including some of the historically black institutions.

The performance of Ossining's black students on the New York state graduation examinations, in terms of passing rates, increased by 16 percentage points in U.S. history and government and by 22 percentage points in biology/living environment since 2000. On mathematics Regents exams, scores improved by 49 percentage points over the same time.

Next Steps

Throughout our journey, we have maintained that we need strong governance. We must sustain our support of our black male students. We must project a sincere belief that everyone can succeed.

Currently we are updating our action plans. We continue to question, self-reflect and call upon ourselves to improve and improve and improve. We embrace a continuous improvement model within which we analyze our results, develop action plans, review the results, re-analyze the new results and create new action plans.

We have acknowledged the shared responsibility regarding the whole village commitment to enhance the success of our black males.

Lastly, we must sustain our optimism and persevere. Our high expectations for the success of our black male students will prevail.

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